

Hilda Specter Morgenstern Merit Scholarship
Application Essay
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“Formation!” my commander barks, jolting me awake at 2 AM. I could be halfway across the globe, snug in my comfortable bed in Cleveland. Instead, I race out of my tent in the Negev desert, and hurriedly don my uniform to train for a mission during the Israeli Defense Force’s (IDF) Operation Breaking Dawn. My unit has seven minutes to get into position with our gear and supplies. I scan my fellow soldiers’ various states of preparedness to see if anyone needs assistance and then load the last boxes of ammunition onto the truck.

These tasks trigger my memory as a frightened twelve-year-old girl who, when visiting family in Israel, found herself hiding in a bomb shelter, terrified, as missiles flew overhead during the 2014 Israel-Gaza War. This trauma compelled me to work towards a world where no innocent civilian endures the same fear I experienced. Since that fateful day, I have been teaching and leading, as well as learning from and collaborating with others, in hopes of achieving my goal. I began with advocacy and student education, co-founding the Israel Action Club at my school in Cleveland, Ohio, attending AIPAC conferences, and serving as Bnei Akiva counselor, Division Head, and Director of Public Relations as a high school student. During my year abroad at Midreshet Torah V’Avodah in Jerusalem, though, I realized that protecting civilians through extracurricular activities was insufficient. Living within Israel’s vulnerable borders convinced me that ensuring my people’s safety and dignity required more. I committed to sacrifice for a cause greater than myself. After learning in seminary about the IDF’s Code of Ethics, which emphasizes defense of Israel as well as the value of human dignity, I decided to enlist in its Search and Rescue Unit. My mission, though, is just in its infancy, and the urgency of this work in safeguarding Israelis is heightened as innocent civilians continue to face unspeakable terror since Hamas’s horrific attacks on October 7.

I plan to continue my mission, first in Tel Aviv University’s (TAU) Middle Eastern Studies track, and then in Columbia University’s Political Science Program in their combined Dual Degree Program. Establishing a fundamental knowledge of international relations and political theory at Columbia, coupled with acquiring detailed knowledge of Middle East politics at TAU, will help launch my intended career in international diplomacy.

The world-class lecturers at TAU will teach me about the political and diplomatic issues unique to the Middle East. My education would be incomplete without studying from experts with “boots on the ground.” Professors at the Moshe Dayan Center for Middle East and African Studies at TAU who work on contemporary intelligence issues will teach me how local politics, religions, and cultures relate to security in the region. I also plan on minoring in Psychology at TAU. Learning how human psychology drives decision-making will enhance my future career in

diplomacy. I am eager to study the behavioral aspects of political conflicts and what can be done to resolve them.

While at Columbia, I will benefit from exposure to renowned professors in the Political Science Department, many associated with Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs. I look forward to learning about transitions to democracy and institutional reform. I also believe, given the antisemitism that has erupted on Columbia's campus, that I can make a substantial impact during my two years there engaging in crucial discussions and respectful dialogue with faculty and students who are willing to hear my perspective.

As a "lone" soldier in the IDF, with no immediate family in Israel, I left my sheltered existence in the United States to put my life on the line and defend a tiny democracy surrounded by theocracies and autocracies. Mirroring Israel's civilian population, my unit—which I consider family—was made up of people from all over the world and across the religious and cultural spectrums. Having grown up in a monolithic Modern Orthodox community, this was a new experience for me. I quickly learned the value of diversity and its importance in an effective democracy. I believe that advocating for change in the Middle East—specifically transitioning to liberal democracies that protect differences of opinion—is critical to maintaining security and peace in the region.

I know that successful advocacy and diplomacy require collaboration and civil discourse, including opinions that differ from my own. As the University of Michigan's Dr. Karl Weick advises: "Argue as if you're right; listen as if you're wrong." My teachers recognized my passionate, yet respectful, advocacy and awarded me the Brandeis University Book Award for outstanding commitment to civic engagement, community service, and social justice in my junior year of high school. As a combat soldier trained to extract survivors and human remains from demolished buildings, I am compelled to ensure that war is only used as a last resort. As a high school student, I had the privilege to speak with Congresswoman Marcia Fudge's Legislative Assistant, Felix Muniz, about Israel's close relationship with the US while championing the Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act of 2019. I know the importance of relationships – both on a grass-roots level and on an institutional level – when it comes to maintaining peace and security.

As I defended Israel's borders, I recognized that my advocacy prior to becoming a soldier was the first step I took towards creating positive change. Still, I know true leadership requires not just determination, but humility and mentorship. Learning from and collaborating with others is essential to becoming an effective diplomat. The faculty and students affiliated with both universities will help me hone the traits necessary to achieve my goal.

Moreover, I draw inspiration from several of my female Jewish commanders in the IDF who serve as my role models. These women extended their mandatory military service in order to maximize their potential in a combat unit, even ascending to the rank of lieutenant. Their unwavering dedication serves as a constant motivation to achieve my best.

Upon my release from the military, I exchanged my boots and rifle for more formal attire suitable for diplomacy. Armed with life-changing experiences and new perspectives, I began working as the Global Engagement Fellow at Global Tides Consulting, a firm that helps bridge cultures in the business world. This company recently organized a program in Kenya using sports as a tool to improve the mental health of and provide an outlet for underprivileged students. The next phase is to pilot a similar program in Rwanda. Our goal is a joint initiative with Israelis, as Rwandans and Jews are two peoples who have suffered near genocides in their recent histories. Ultimately, my goal is to foster a sense of community among different cultures who share the common value of humanism.

Hopefully, the skills and knowledge I will acquire at Columbia and Tel Aviv University combined with the guidance I will receive from countless mentors will help me join the ranks of Jewish female leaders as I tackle the deep-seated issues plaguing the Middle East. I hope that no other twelve-year-old girl will have to crouch in a bomb shelter, praying for her life, as I did nearly ten years ago and too many are today.